

Jabir ibn Hayyan

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Abū Mūsā Jābir ibn Ḥayyān (Arabic: أبو موسى جابر بن حيان, variously called **al-Ṣūfī**, **al-Azdī**, **al-Kūfī**, or **al-Ṭūsī**), died c. 806–816, is the purported author of a large number of works in Arabic, often called the Jabirian corpus. The c. 215 treatises that survive today mainly deal with **alchemy** and **chemistry**, **magic**, and **Shi'ite** religious philosophy. However, the original scope of the corpus was vast, covering a wide range of topics ranging from **cosmology**, **astronomy** and **astrology**, over **medicine**, **pharmacology**, **zoology** and **botany**, to **metaphysics**, **logic**, and **grammar**.

The works attributed to Jabir, which are tentatively dated to c. 850 – c. 950,^[1] contain the oldest known systematic classification of chemical substances, and the oldest known instructions for deriving an inorganic compound (**sal ammoniac** or **ammonium chloride**) from **organic substances** (such as plants, blood, and hair) by chemical means.^[2] His works also contain one of the earliest known versions of the sulfur-mercury theory of metals, a **mineralogical** theory that would remain dominant until the 18th century.^[3]

A significant part of Jabir's writings deal with a philosophical theory known as "the science of the balance" (Arabic: *ilm al-mīzān*), which was aimed at reducing all phenomena (including material substances and their elements) to a system of measures and quantitative proportions. The Jabirian works also contain some of the earliest preserved Shi'ite **imamological** doctrines, which Jabir presented as deriving from his purported master, the Shi'ite Imam **Ja'far al-Ṣādiq** (died 765).

As early as the 10th century, the identity and exact corpus of works of Jabir was in dispute in Islamic scholarly circles. The authorship of all these works by a single figure, and even the existence of a historical Jabir, are also doubted by modern scholars. Instead, Jabir ibn Hayyan is generally thought to have been a **pseudonym** used by an anonymous school of Shi'ite alchemists writing in the late 9th and early 10th centuries.

Some Arabic Jabirian works (e.g., *The Great Book of Mercy*, and *The Book of Seventy*) were translated into Latin under the **Latinized** name **Geber**, and in 13th-century Europe an anonymous writer, usually referred to as **pseudo-Geber**, started to produce alchemical and metallurgical writings under this name.^[4]

Biography



Artistic impression of Jabir and his master [Ja'far al-Sâdiq](#).

Historicity

It is not clear whether Jabir ibn Hayyan ever existed as a historical person. He is purported to have lived in the 8th century, and to have been a disciple of the Shi'ite Imam [Ja'far al-Sâdiq](#) (died 765).^[5] However, he is not mentioned in any historical source before c. 900, and the first known author to write about Jabir from a biographical point of view was the [Baghdadi](#) bibliographer [Ibn al-Nadīm](#) (c. 932–995).^[6] In his *Fihrist* ("The Book Catalogue", written in 987), Ibn al-Nadīm compiled a list of Jabir's works, adding a short notice on the various claims that were then circulating about Jabir.^[7] Already in Ibn al-Nadīm's time, there were some people who explicitly asserted that Jabir had never existed, although Ibn al-Nadīm himself disagreed with this claim.^[8] Jabir was often ignored by later medieval Islamic biographers and historians, but even early Shi'ite [biographers](#) such as [Aḥmad al-Barqī](#) (died c. 893), [Abū 'Amr al-Kashshī](#) (first half of the 10th century), [Aḥmad ibn 'Alī al-Najāshī](#) (983–1058), and [Abū Ja'far al-Ṭūsī](#) (995–1067), who wrote long volumes on the companions of the Shi'ite Imams

Jābir ibn Ḥayyān

جابر بن حیان



15th-century depiction of Jabir

Died c. 806–816

Philosophical work

Era Islamic Golden Age

Region [Kufa](#) (Iraq) / [Tus](#) (Iran) / unknown

Language [Arabic](#)

Main interests [Alchemy and chemistry](#), [magic](#), [Shi'ite religious philosophy](#)

Notable ideas Use of [organic substances](#) in chemistry, [sulfur-mercury theory of metals](#), science of the balance, [science of artificial generation](#)

(including the many companions of Ja'far al-Ṣādiq), did not mention Jabir at all.^[9]

Dating of the Jabirian corpus

Apart from outright denying his existence, there were also some who, already in Ibn al-Nadīm's time, questioned whether the writings attributed to Jabir were really written by him.^[10] The authenticity of these writings was expressly denied by the Baghdadi philosopher [Abū Sulaymān al-Sijistānī](#) (c. 912–985) and his pupil [Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī](#) (c. 932–1023), though this may have been related to the hostility of both these thinkers to [alchemy](#) in general.^[11] Modern scholarly analysis has tended to confirm the inauthenticity of the writings attributed to Jabir. Much of the philosophical terminology used in the Jabirian treatises was only coined around the middle of the 9th century,^[12] and some of the [Greek philosophical texts](#) cited in the Jabirian writings are known to have been [translated into Arabic](#) towards the end of the 9th century.^[13] Moreover, an important part of the corpus deals with early Shi'ite religious philosophy that is elsewhere only attested in late 9th-century and early 10th-century sources.^[14] As a result, the dating of the Jabirian corpus to c. 850–950 has been widely accepted in modern scholarship.^[1] However, it has also been noted that many Jabirian treatises show clear signs of having been redacted multiple times, and the writings as we now have them may well have been based on an earlier 8th-century core.^[15] Despite the obscurity involved, it is not impossible that some of these writings, in their earliest form, were written by a real Jabir ibn Hayyan.^[16] In any case, it is clear that Jabir's name was used as a [pseudonym](#) by one or more anonymous Shi'ite alchemists writing in the late 9th and early 10th centuries, who also redacted the corpus as we now know it.^[17]

Biographical clues and legend

Jabir was generally known by the [kunya](#) Abū Mūsā ("Father of Mūsā"), or sometimes Abū 'Abd Allāh ("Father of 'Abd Allāh"), and by the [nisbas](#) (attributive names) al-Ṣūfī, al-Azdī, al-Kūfī, or al-Ṭūsī.^[18] His grandfather's name is mentioned by Ibn al-Nadīm as 'Abd Allāh.^[19] If the attribution of the name al-Azdī to Jabir is authentic,^[20] this would point to his affiliation with the [Southern-Arabian](#) (Yemenite) tribe of the [Azd](#). However, it is not clear whether Jabir was an [Arab](#) belonging to the Azd tribe, or a non-Arab Muslim client ([mawlā](#)) of the Azd.^[21] If he was a non-Arab Muslim client of the Azd, he is most likely to have been [Persian](#), given his ties with eastern Iran (his [nisba](#) al-Ṭūsī also points to [Tus](#), a city in Khurasan).^[22] According to [Ibn al-Nadīm](#), Jabir hailed from [Khurasan](#) (eastern [Iran](#)), but spent most of his life in [Kufa](#) (Iraq),^[23] both regions where the Azd tribe was well-settled.^[24] Various late reports put his date of death between 806 (190 AH) and 816 (200 AH).^[25]

Given the lack of independent biographical sources, most of the biographical information about Jabir can be traced back to the Jabirian writings themselves.^[26] There are references throughout the Jabirian corpus to the Shi'ite Imam Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (died 765), whom Jabir generally calls "my master" (Arabic: *sayyidī*), and whom he represents as the original source of all his knowledge.^[27] In one work, Jabir is also represented as an associate of the [Bactrian](#) vizier family of the [Barmakids](#), whereas Ibn al-Nadīm reports that some claimed Jabir to have been especially devoted to [Ja'far ibn Yaḥyā al-Barmakī](#) (767–803), the [Abbasid](#) vizier of *One Thousand and One Nights* fame.^[28] Jabir's links with the Abbasids were stressed even more by later tradition, which turned him into a favorite of the Abbasid caliph [Hārūn al-Rashīd](#) (c. 763–809, also appearing in *One Thousand and One Nights*), for whom Jabir would have composed a treatise on alchemy, and who is supposed to have commanded the translation of Greek works into Arabic on Jabir's instigation.^[29]

Given Jabir's purported ties with both the Shi'ite Imam Ja'far al-Ṣādiq and the Barmakid family (who served the Abbasids as [viziers](#)), or with the Abbasid caliphs themselves, it has sometimes been thought plausible that Ḥayyān al-ʿAṭṭār ("Hayyan the Druggist"), a proto-Shi'ite activist who was fighting for the [Abbasid cause](#) in the early 8th century, may have been Jabir's father (Jabir's name "Ibn Hayyan" literally means "The Son of Hayyan").^[30] Although there is no direct evidence supporting this hypothesis, it fits very well in the historical context, and it allows one to think of Jabir, however obscure, as a historical figure.^[31] Because Ḥayyān al-ʿAṭṭār was supposedly executed not long after 721, the hypothesis even made it possible to estimate Jabir's date of birth at c. 721.^[32] However, it has recently been argued that Ḥayyān al-ʿAṭṭār probably lived at least until c. 744,^[33] and that as a client (*mawlā*) of the [Nakha'](#) tribe he is highly unlikely to have been the father of Jabir (who is supposed to have been a client/member of the Azd).^[34]

The Jabirian corpus

There are about 600 Arabic works attributed to Jabir ibn Hayyan that are known by name,^[35] approximately 215 of which are still extant today.^[36] Though some of these are full-length works (e.g., *The Great Book on Specific Properties*),^[37] most of them are relatively short treatises and belong to larger collections (*The One Hundred and Twelve Books*, *The Five Hundred Books*, etc.) in which they function rather more like chapters.^[38] When the individual chapters of some full-length works are counted as separate treatises too,^[39] the total length of the corpus may be estimated at 3000 treatises/chapters.^[40]

The overwhelming majority of Jabirian treatises that are still extant today deal with [alchemy](#) or [chemistry](#) (though these may also contain religious speculations, and discuss a wide range of other topics ranging from [cosmology](#) to [grammar](#)).^[41] Nevertheless, there are also a few extant treatises which deal with [magic](#), i.e., "the science of [talismans](#)" (*ʿilm al-ṭilasmāt*, a form of [theurgy](#)) and "the science of specific properties" (*ʿilm al-khawāṣṣ*, the science dealing with the

hidden powers of mineral, vegetable and animal substances, and with their practical applications in medical and various other pursuits).^[42] Other writings dealing with a great variety of subjects were also attributed to Jabir (this includes such subjects as [engineering](#), [medicine](#), [pharmacology](#), [zoology](#), [botany](#), [logic](#), [metaphysics](#), [mathematics](#), [astronomy](#) and [astrology](#)), but almost all of these are lost today.^[43]

Alchemical writings

Note that [Paul Kraus](#), who first [catalogued](#) the Jabirian writings and whose numbering is followed here, conceived of his division of Jabir's alchemical writings (Kr. nos. 5–1149) as roughly chronological in order.^[44]

- **The Great Book of Mercy** (*Kitāb al-Raḥma al-kabīr*, Kr. no. 5): This was considered by Kraus to be the oldest work in the corpus, from which it may have been relatively independent. Some 10th-century skeptics considered it to be the only authentic work written by Jabir himself.^[45] The Persian physician, alchemist and philosopher [Abū Bakr al-Rāzī](#) (c. 865–925) appears to have written a (lost) commentary on it.^[46] It was [translated into Latin](#) in the 13th century under the title *Liber Misericordiae*.^[47]
- **The One Hundred and Twelve Books** (*al-Kutub al-mi'a wa-l-ithnā 'ashar*, Kr. nos. 6–122): This collection consists of relatively independent treatises dealing with different practical aspects of alchemy, often framed as an explanation of the symbolic allusions of the 'ancients'. An important role is played by [organic](#) alchemy. Its theoretical foundations are similar to those of *The Seventy Books* (i.e., the reduction of bodies to the elements fire, air, water and earth, and of the elements to the 'natures' hot, cold, moist, and dry), though their exposition is less systematic. Just like in *The Seventy Books*, the quantitative directions in *The One Hundred and Twelve Books* are still of a practical and 'experimental' rather than of a theoretical and speculative nature, such as will be the case in *The Books of the Balances*.^[48] The first four treatises in this collection, i.e., the three-part *Book of the Element of the Foundation* (*Kitāb Uṣṭuqus al-uss*, Kr. nos. 6–8, the second part of which contains an early version of the famous [Emerald Tablet](#) attributed to [Hermes Trismegistus](#))^[49] and a commentary on it (*Tafsīr kitāb al-uṣṭuqus*, Kr. no. 9), have been translated into English.^[50]
- **The Seventy Books** (*al-Kutub al-sab'ūn*, Kr. nos. 123–192) (also called *The Book of Seventy*, *Kitāb al-Sab'īn*): This contains a systematic exposition of Jabirian alchemy, in which the several treatises form a much more unified whole as compared to *The One Hundred and Twelve Books*.^[51] It is organized into seven parts, containing ten treatises each: three parts dealing with the preparation of the elixir from animal, vegetable, and mineral substances, respectively; two parts dealing with the four elements from a theoretical and practical point of view, respectively; one part focusing on the alchemical use of animal substances, and one part

focusing on minerals and metals.^[52] It was translated into Latin by [Gerard of Cremona](#) (c. 1114–1187) under the title *Liber de Septuaginta*.^[53]

- **Ten books added to the Seventy** (*‘asharat kutub muḍāfa ilā l-sab‘īn*, Kr. nos. 193–202): The sole surviving treatise from this small collection (*The Book of Clarification*, *Kitāb al-Īdāh*, Kr. no. 195) briefly discusses the different methods for preparing the elixir, criticizing the philosophers who have only expounded the method of preparing the elixir starting from mineral substances, to the exclusion of vegetable and animal substances.^[54]
- **The Ten Books of Rectifications** (*al-Muṣaḥḥaḥāt al-‘ashara*, Kr. nos. 203–212): Relates the successive improvements (“rectifications”, *muṣaḥḥaḥāt*) brought to the art by such ‘alchemists’ as ‘[Pythagoras](#)’ (Kr. no. 203), ‘[Socrates](#)’ (Kr. no. 204), ‘[Plato](#)’ (Kr. no. 205), ‘[Aristotle](#)’ (Kr. no. 206), ‘[Archigenes](#)’ (Kr. nos. 207–208), ‘[Homer](#)’ (Kr. no. 209), ‘[Democritus](#)’ (Kr. no. 210), [Ḥarbī al-Himyarī](#) (Kr. no. 211),^[55] and Jabir himself (Kr. no. 212). The only surviving treatise from this small collection (*The Book of the Rectifications of Plato*, *Kitāb Muṣaḥḥaḥāt Iflāṭūn*, Kr. no. 205) is divided into 90 chapters: 20 chapters on processes using only mercury, 10 chapters on processes using mercury and one additional ‘medicine’ (*dawā*), 30 chapters on processes using mercury and two additional ‘medicines’, and 30 chapters on processes using mercury and three additional ‘medicines’. All of these are preceded by an introduction describing the laboratory equipment mentioned in the treatise.^[56]
- **The Twenty Books** (*al-Kutub al-ishrūn*, Kr. nos. 213–232): Only one treatise (*The Book of the Crystal*, *Kitāb al-Billawra*, Kr. no. 220) and a long extract from another one (*The Book of the Inner Consciousness*, *Kitāb al-Ḍamīr*, Kr. no. 230) survive.^[57] *The Book of the Inner Consciousness* appears to deal with the subject of specific properties (*khawāṣṣ*) and with [talismans](#) (*ṭilasmāt*).^[58]
- **The Seventeen Books** (Kr. nos. 233–249); **three treatises added to the Seventeen Books** (Kr. nos. 250–252); **thirty unnamed books** (Kr. nos. 253–282); **The Four Treatises** and some related treatises (Kr. nos. 283–286, 287–292); **The Ten Books According to the Opinion of Balīnās, the Master of Talismans** (Kr. nos. 293–302): Of these, only three treatises appear to be extant, i.e., the *Kitāb al-Mawāzīn* (Kr. no. 242), the *Kitāb al-Istiḳṣā’* (Kr. no. 248), and the *Kitāb al-Kāmil* (Kr. no. 291).^[59]
- **The Books of the Balances** (*Kutub al-Mawāzīn*, Kr. nos. 303–446): This collection appears to have consisted of 144 treatises of medium length, 79 of which are known by name and 44 of which are still extant. Though relatively independent from each other and devoted to a very wide range of topics ([cosmology](#), [grammar](#), [music theory](#), [medicine](#), [logic](#), [metaphysics](#), [mathematics](#), [astronomy](#), [astrology](#), etc.), they all approach their subject matter from the perspective of “the science of the balance” (*‘ilm al-mīzān*, a theory which aims at reducing all phenomena to a system of measures and quantitative proportions).^[60] *The Books of the Balances* are also an important source for Jabir’s speculations regarding the apparition of the

"two brothers" (*al-akhawān*),^[61] a doctrine which was later to become of great significance to the Egyptian alchemist *Ibn Umayl* (c. 900–960).^[62]

- **The Five Hundred Books** (*al-Kutub al-Khamsumi'a*, Kr. nos. 447–946): Only 29 treatises in this collection are known by name, 15 of which are extant. Its contents appear to have been mainly religious in nature, with moral exhortations and alchemical allegories occupying an important place.^[63] Among the extant treatises, *The Book of the Glorious* (*Kitāb al-Mājid*, Kr. no. 706) and *The Book of Explication* (*Kitāb al-Bayān*, Kr. no. 785) are notable for containing some of the earliest preserved [Shi'ite eschatological](#), [soteriological](#) and [imamological](#) doctrines.^[64] Intermittent extracts from *The Book of Kingship* (*Kitāb al-Mulk*, Kr. no. 454) exist in a Latin translation under the title *Liber regni*.^[65]
- **The Books on the Seven Metals** (Kr. nos. 947–956): Seven treatises which are closely related to *The Books of the Balances*, each one dealing with one of Jabir's [seven metals](#) (respectively gold, silver, copper, iron, tin, lead, and *khārṣīnī* or "chinese metal"). In one manuscript, these are followed by the related three-part *Book of Concision* (*Kitāb al-Ījāz*, Kr. nos. 954–956).^[66]
- **Diverse alchemical treatises** (Kr. nos. 957–1149): In this category, Kraus placed a large number of named treatises which he could not with any confidence attribute to one of the alchemical collections of the corpus. According to Kraus, some of them may actually have been part of *The Five Hundred Books*.^[67]

Writings on magic (talismans, specific properties)

Among the surviving Jabirian treatises, there are also a number of relatively independent treatises dealing with "the science of [talismans](#)" (*ʿilm al-ṭilasmāt*, a form of [theurgy](#)) and with "the science of specific properties" (*ʿilm al-khawāṣṣ*, i.e., the science dealing with the hidden powers of mineral, vegetable and animal substances, and with their practical applications in medical and various other pursuits).^[68] These are:

- **The Book of the Search** (*Kitāb al-Baḥṭh*, also known as *The Book of Extracts*, *Kitāb al-Nukhab*, Kr. no. 1800): This long work deals with the philosophical foundations of [theurgy](#) or "the science of talismans" (*ʿilm al-ṭilasmāt*). It is also notable for citing a significant number of Greek authors: there are references to (the works of) [Plato](#), [Aristotle](#), [Archimedes](#), [Galen](#), [Alexander of Aphrodisias](#), [Porphyry](#), [Themistius](#), (pseudo-) [Apollonius of Tyana](#), and others.^[69]
- **The Book of Fifty** (*Kitāb al-Khamsīn*, perhaps identical to *The Great Book on Talismans*, *Kitāb al-Ṭilasmāt al-kabīr*, Kr. nos. 1825–1874): This work, only extracts of which are extant, deals with subjects such as the theoretical basis of [theurgy](#), specific properties, [astrology](#), and [demonology](#).^[70]
- **The Great Book on Specific Properties** (*Kitāb al-Khawāṣṣ al-kabīr*, Kr. nos. 1900–1970): This is Jabir's main work on "the science of specific properties" (*ʿilm al-khawāṣṣ*), i.e., the science dealing with the hidden powers of mineral, vegetable and animal substances, and with their

practical applications in medical and various other pursuits.^[71] However, it also contains a number of chapters on "the science of the balance" (*ilm al-mīzān*, a theory which aims at reducing all phenomena to a system of measures and quantitative proportions).^[72]

- **The Book of the King** (*Kitāb al-Malik*, Kr. no. 1985): Short treatise on the effectiveness of talismans.^[73]
- **The Book of Black Magic** (*Kitāb al-Jafr al-aswad*, Kr. no. 1996): This treatise is not mentioned in any other Jabirian work.^[74]

Other extant writings

Writings on a wide variety of other topics were also attributed to Jabir. Most of these are lost (see below), except for:

- **The Book on Poisons and on the Repelling of their Harmful Effects** (*Kitāb al-Sumūm wa-daf' maḍārrihā*, Kr. no. 2145): on pharmacology.^[75]
- **The Book of Comprehensiveness** (*Kitāb al-Ishtimāl*, Kr. no. 2715): a long extract of this philosophical treatise is preserved by the poet and alchemist al-Ṭughrāī (1061–c. 1121).^[76]

Lost writings

Although a significant number of the Jabirian treatises on alchemy and magic do survive, many of them are also lost. Apart from two surviving treatises (see immediately above), Jabir's many writings on other topics are all lost:

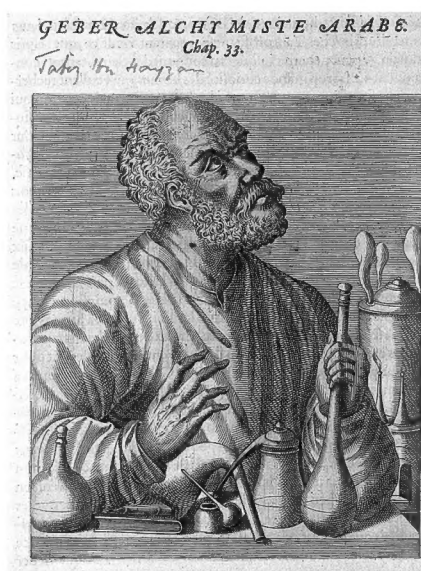
- **Catalogues** (Kr. nos. 1–4): There are three catalogues which Jabir is said to have written of his own works (Kr. nos. 1–3), and one *Book on the Order of Reading our Books* (*Kitāb Tartīb qirā'at kutubinā*, Kr. no. 4). They are all lost.^[77]
- **The Books on Stratagems** (*Kutub al-Ḥiyal*, Kr. nos. 1150–1449) and **The Books on Military Stratagems and Tricks** (*Kutub al-Ḥiyal al-ḥurūbiyya wa-l-makāyid*, Kr. nos. 1450–1749): Two large collections on 'mechanical tricks' (the Arabic word *ḥiyal* translates Greek μηχαναί, *mēchanai*)^[78] and military engineering, both lost.^[79]
- **Medical and pharmacological writings** (Kr. nos. 2000–2499): Seven treatises are known by name, the only one extant being *The Book on Poisons and on the Repelling of their Harmful Effects* (*Kitāb al-Sumūm wa-daf' maḍārrihā*, Kr. no. 2145). Kraus also included into this category a lost treatise on zoology (*The Book of Animals*, *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, Kr. no. 2458) and a lost treatise on botany (*The Book of Plants* or *The Book of Herbs*, *Kitāb al-Nabāt* or *Kitāb al-Ḥashā'ish*, Kr. no. 2459).^[80]
- **Philosophical writings** (*Kutub al-falsafa*, Kr. nos. 2500–2799): Under this heading, Kraus mentioned 23 works, most of which appear to deal with Aristotelian philosophy (titles include, e.g., *The Books of Logic According to the Opinion of Aristotle*, Kr. no. 2580; *The Book of*

Categories, Kr. no. 2582; *The Book on Interpretation*, Kr. no. 2583; *The Book of Metaphysics*, Kr. no. 2681; *The Book of the Refutation of Aristotle in his Book On the Soul*, Kr. no. 2734). Of one treatise (*The Book of Comprehensiveness*, *Kitāb al-Ishtimāl*, Kr. no. 2715) a long extract is preserved by the poet and alchemist *al-Ṭughrāī* (1061–c. 1121), but all other treatises in this group are lost.^[81]

- **Mathematical, astronomical and astrological writings** (Kr. nos. 2800–2899): Thirteen treatises in this category are known by name, all of which are lost. Notable titles include a *Book of Commentary on Euclid* (*Kitāb Sharḥ Uqlīdiyas*, Kr. no. 2813), a *Commentary on the Book of the Weight of the Crown* by *Archimedes* (*Sharḥ kitāb wazn al-tāj li-Arshamīdas*, Kr. no. 2821), a *Book of Commentary on the Almagest* (*Kitāb Sharḥ al-Majisṭī*, Kr. no. 2834), a *Subtle Book on Astronomical Tables* (*Kitāb al-Zāj al-laṭīf*, Kr. no. 2839), a *Compendium on the Astrolabe from a Theoretical and Practical Point of View* (*Kitāb al-jāmiʿ fī l-asṭurlāb ʿilman wa-ʿamalan*, Kr. no. 2845), and a *Book of the Explanation of the Figures of the Zodiac and Their Activities* (*Kitāb Sharḥ ṣuwar al-burūj wa-afālihā*, Kr. no. 2856).^[82]
- **Religious writings** (Kr. nos. 2900–3000): Apart from those known to belong to *The Five Hundred Books* (see above), there are a number of religious treatises whose exact place in the corpus is uncertain, all of which are lost. Notable titles include *Books on the Shiʿite Schools of Thought* (*Kutub fī madhāhib al-shīʿa*, Kr. no. 2914), *Our Books on the Transmigration of the Soul* (*Kutubunā fī l-tanāsukh*, Kr. no. 2947), *The Book of the Imamate* (*Kitāb al-Imāma*, Kr. no. 2958), and *The Book in Which I Explained the Torah* (*Kitābī alladhī fassartu fīhi al-tawrāt*, Kr. no. 2982).^[83]

Historical background

Greco-Egyptian, Byzantine and Persian alchemy



Artistic impression of Jabir.

The Jabirian writings contain a number of references to Greco-Egyptian alchemists such as [pseudo-Democritus](#) (fl. c. 60), [Mary the Jewess](#) (fl. c. 0–300), [Agathodaemon](#) (fl. c. 300), and [Zosimos of Panopolis](#) (fl. c. 300), as well as to legendary figures such as [Hermes Trismegistus](#) and [Ostanes](#), and to scriptural figures such as [Moses](#) and Jesus (to whom a number of alchemical writings were also ascribed).^[84] However, these references may have been meant as an appeal to ancient authority rather than as an acknowledgement of any intellectual borrowing,^[85] and in any case Jabirian alchemy was very different from what is found in the extant Greek alchemical treatises: it was much more systematic and coherent,^[86] it made much less use of allegory and symbols,^[87] and a much more important place was occupied by philosophical speculations and their application to laboratory experiments.^[88] Furthermore, whereas Greek alchemical texts had been almost exclusively focused on the use of mineral substances (i.e., on '[inorganic chemistry](#)'), Jabirian alchemy pioneered the use of vegetable and animal substances, and so represented an innovative shift towards '[organic chemistry](#)'.^[89]

Nevertheless, there are some important theoretical similarities between Jabirian alchemy and contemporary [Byzantine](#) alchemy,^[90] and even though the Jabirian authors do not seem to have known Byzantine works that are extant today such as the alchemical works attributed to the [Neoplatonic](#) philosophers [Olympiodorus](#) (c. 495–570) and [Stephanus of Alexandria](#) (fl. c. 580–640),^[91] it seems that they were at least partly drawing on a parallel tradition of [theoretical](#) and [philosophical](#) alchemy.^[92] In any case, the writings actually used by the Jabirian authors appear to have mainly consisted of alchemical works falsely attributed to ancient philosophers like Socrates, Plato, and Apollonius of Tyana,^[89] only some of which are still extant today, and whose philosophical content still needs to be determined.^[93]

One of the innovations in Jabirian alchemy was the addition of [sal ammoniac](#) ([ammonium chloride](#)) to the category of chemical substances known as '[spirits](#)' (i.e., strongly volatile substances). This included both naturally occurring sal ammoniac and synthetic ammonium chloride as produced from [organic substances](#), and so the addition of sal ammoniac to the list of '[spirits](#)' is likely a product of the new focus on [organic chemistry](#). Since the word for sal ammoniac used in the Jabirian corpus (*nošāder*) is [Iranian](#) in origin, it has been suggested that the direct precursors of Jabirian alchemy may have been active in the [Hellenizing](#) and [Syriacizing](#) schools of the [Sassanid Empire](#).^[94]

Chemical philosophy

Elements and natures

According to [Aristotelian physics](#), each [element](#) is composed of two qualities: [fire](#) is hot and dry, [earth](#) is cold and dry, [water](#) is cold and moist, and [air](#) is hot and moist. In the Jabirian corpus, these qualities came to be called "natures" (Arabic: *ṭabāʾī*), and elements are said to be

composed of these 'natures', plus an underlying "substance" (*jawhar*). In metals two of these 'natures' were interior and two were exterior. For example, lead was predominantly cold and dry and gold was predominantly hot and moist. Thus, Jabir theorized, by rearranging the natures of one metal, a different metal would result. Like [Zosimos](#), Jabir believed this would require a catalyst, an *al-iksir*, the elusive elixir that would make this transformation possible – which in European alchemy became known as the [philosopher's stone](#).^[95]

The sulfur–mercury theory of metals

The sulfur–mercury theory of metals, though first attested in [pseudo-Apollonius of Tyana's](#) *The Secret of Creation* (*Sirr al-khalīqa*, late 8th or early 9th century, but largely based on older sources),^[96] was also adopted by the Jabirian authors. According to the Jabirian version of this theory, [metals](#) form in the earth through the mixing of [sulfur](#) and [mercury](#). Depending on the quality of the sulfur, different metals are formed, with [gold](#) being formed by the most subtle and well-balanced sulfur.^[97] This theory, which is ultimately based on ancient [meteorological](#) speculations such as those found in [Aristotle's](#) *Meteorology*, formed the basis of all theories of metallic composition until the 18th century.^[98]

See also

- [History of chemistry](#)
 - [Timeline of chemistry](#)
- [Abū Bakr al-Rāzī](#) (c. 865–925, famous contemporary chemist)
- [Pseudo-Geber](#) (13th–14th century Latin authors writing under Jabir's name)
- [Science in medieval Islam](#)

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1. This is the dating put forward by [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I, p. lxxv. For its acceptance by other scholars, see the references in [Delva 2017](#), p. 38, note 14. Notable critics of Kraus' dating are [Sezgin 1971](#) and [Nomanul Haq 1994](#), pp. 3–47 (cf. [Forster 2018](#)).
2. [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. II, pp. 41–42 (referring to [Stapleton 1905](#); [Ruska 1923a](#); [Ruska 1928](#)). See also [Stapleton, Azo & Hidayat Husain 1927](#), pp. 338–340.
3. [Norris 2006](#).

4. [Newman 1985](#); [Newman 1991](#), pp. 57–103. It has been argued by Ahmad Y. Al-Hassan that the pseudo-Geber works were actually translated into Latin from the Arabic (see Al-Hassan, Ahmad Y. "The Arabic Origin of the *Summa* and Geber Latin Works: A Refutation of Berthelot, Ruska, and Newman Based on Arabic Sources", in: [al-Hassan 2009](#), pp. 53–104; also available online (<http://www.history-science-technology.com/geber/geber%2004.html>)).
5. References to Ja'far al-Šādiq occur throughout the Jabirian corpus (see [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I, pp. xxxvi–xxxvii). See also below.
6. [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I, pp. xvii, 189; [Delva 2017](#), p. 38, note 15.
7. [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I, pp. xvii, xix–xxi, xliii–xlv; [Fück 1951](#), p. 124. An annotated English translation of this notice and the list of Jabir's works may be found in [Fück 1951](#), pp. 95–104.
8. [Fück 1951](#), pp. 124–125.
9. [Delva 2017](#), p. 39. However, as also noted by Delva 2017, pp. 39–40, note 19, Jabir does occur in two possibly early Shi'ite [hadith](#) collections, which are in need of further investigation.
10. [Fück 1951](#), p. 124.
11. [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I, pp. lxiii–lxv; [Delva 2017](#), p. 39, note 17.
12. See already [Kraus 1930](#) and [Kraus 1931](#). This was denied by [Sezgin 1971](#).
13. [Nomanul Haq 1994](#), pp. 230–242 has argued that one of these translations of Greek philosophical texts cited by Jabir actually dates to the 8th century, but this was contradicted by [Gannagé 1998](#), pp. 427–449 (cf. [Delva 2017](#), p. 38, note 14).
14. Kraus regarded Jabirian Shi'ism as an early form of [Isma'ilism](#) (see [Kraus 1930](#), [Kraus 1942](#); see also [Corbin 1950](#)), but it has since been shown that it significantly differs from Isma'ilism (see [Lory 1989](#), pp. 47–125; [Lory 2000](#)), and may have been an independent sectarian Shi'ite current related to the late 9th-century [ghulāt](#) (see [Capezzzone 2020](#)).
15. [Lory 1983](#), pp. 62–79. For other observations of the existence of different editorial layers in Jabirian treatises, see [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I, pp. xxxiii–xxxvi; [Gannagé 1998](#), pp. 409–410.
16. [Delva 2017](#), p. 53, note 87.
17. [Capezzzone 2020](#); cf. [Lory 2008b](#).

18. [Nomanul Haq 1994](#), p. 33, note 1. The *kunya* Abū 'Abd Allāh only occurs in Ibn al-Nadīm (see [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I, p. xliii, note 5). [Ibn Khallikān](#) (1211–1282) gives Jabir's *nisba* as al-*Tarsūsī*, or in some manuscripts as al-*Tartūsī*, but these are most likely scribal errors for al-*Tūsī* (see [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I, p. xli, note 3).
19. [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I, p. xli, note 9. Kraus adds that 'Abd Allāh as the name of Jabir's grandfather is also mentioned in Jabir's *Kitāb al-Najīb* (Kr. no. 977).
20. [Ruska 1923b](#), p. 57 still thought the attribution to Jabir of the name al-Azdī to be false. Later sources assume its authenticity.
21. [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I, p. xli, note 1; [Delva 2017](#), p. 36. In the 8th century, it was still necessary for non-Arabs to secure an affiliation with an Arab tribe in order to be allowed to convert to Islam.
22. [Delva 2017](#), p. 36. According to a copyist of one of the manuscripts containing Jabir's works, he also died in Tus (see [Delva 2017](#), p. 36, note 6). Jabir was held to be an Arab by [Holmyard 1927](#), pp. 29–32, a view still taken by [Forster 2018](#). He was regarded as Persian by [Ruska 1923b](#), p. 57 (cf. [Holmyard 1927](#), p. 29), who was echoed by such scholars as [Sarton 1927–1948](#), vol. II.2, p. 1044 and [Newman 1996](#), p. 178.
23. [Delva 2017](#), pp. 36–37.
24. [Holmyard 1927](#), p. 29; [Delva 2017](#), p. 49.
25. [Delva 2017](#), pp. 36–37, note 6.
26. This even holds for most of what was written by Ibn al-Nadīm; see [Delva 2017](#), pp. 38–39.
27. [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I, pp. xxxvi–xxxvii. That the references are indeed to Ja'far al-Šādiq is made clear by the Shi'ite context in which they occur, and by the fact that Ja'far's patronymic "ibn Muḥammad" is sometimes included (see [Holmyard 1927](#), pp. 34–35; [Ruska 1927](#), p. 42). Ibn al-Nadīm's isolated statement that some claimed "my master" to refer to Ja'far ibn Yaḥyā al-Barmakī was called "arbitrary" by [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I, p. xliv, note 2.
28. [Kraus 1931](#), pp. 28–29; cf. [Delva 2017](#), p. 36, note 3. Kraus expressly compared the seemingly legendary tales about Jabir and the Barmakids with those of the *One Thousand and One Nights*.
29. This is first related by the 14th century alchemist [al-Jildakī](#) (see [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I, pp. xli–xliii; cf. [Delva 2017](#), p. 36, note 4).
30. [Holmyard 1927](#), pp. 29–32, 35.
31. [Delva 2017](#), pp. 41–42, 52.
32. [Delva 2017](#), p. 42; cf. [Holmyard 1927](#), p. 32.

33. [Delva 2017](#), pp. 46–47.
34. [Delva 2017](#), p. 49, 52.
35. These are listed in [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I, pp. 203–210.
36. [Lory 1983](#), p. 51.
37. [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I, pp. 148–152, 205 (counted as one of the c. 600 works there).
38. [Lory 1983](#), pp. 51–52; [Delva 2017](#), p. 37, note n. 9.
39. See, e.g., *The Great Book on Specific Properties*, whose 71 chapters are counted by [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I, pp. 148–152 as nos. 1900–1970. Note, however, that this procedure is not always followed: e.g., even though *The Book of the Rectifications of Plato* consists of 90 chapters, it is still counted as only one treatise (Kr. no. 205, see [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I, pp. 64–67).
40. This is the number arrived at by [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I. Kraus' method of counting has been criticized by [Nomanul Haq 1994](#), pp. 11–12, who warns that "we should view with a great deal of suspicion any arguments for a plurality of authors which is based on Kraus' inflated estimate of the volume of the Jabirian corpus".
41. See the section 'Alchemical writings' below. Religious speculations occur throughout the corpus (see, e.g., [Lory 2016a](#)), but are especially prominent in *The Five Hundred Books* (see below). *The Books of the Balances* deal with alchemy from a philosophical and theoretical point of view, and contain treatises devoted to a wide range of topics (see below).
42. See the section 'Writings on magic (talismans, specific properties)' below. Kraus refers to *ilm al-ṭilasmāt* as "théurgie" ([theurgy](#)) throughout; see, e.g., [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I, pp. 75, 143, *et pass.* On "the science of specific properties" (*ilm al-khawāṣṣ*), see [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. II, pp. 61–95.
43. Only one full work (*The Book on Poisons and on the Repelling of their Harmful Effects*, *Kitāb al-Sumūm wa-dafʿ maḍārrihā*, Kr. no. 2145, medical/pharmacological) and a long extract of another one (*The Book of Comprehensiveness*, *Kitāb al-Ishtimāl*, Kr. no. 2715, philosophical) are still extant today; see the section 'Other writings' below, with [Sezgin 1971](#), pp. 264–265. [Sezgin 1971](#), pp. 268–269 also lists 30 extant works which were not known to Kraus, and whose subject matter and place in the corpus has not yet been determined.
44. [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I. Kraus based this order on an extensive analysis of the many internal references to other treatises in the corpus. A slightly different chronological order is postulated by [Sezgin 1971](#), pp. 231–258 (who places *The Books of the Balances* after *The Five Hundred Books*, see pp. 252–253).
45. All of the preceding in [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I, pp. 5–9.

46. Kraus 1942–1943, vol. I, pp. lx–lxi.
47. Edited by Darmstaedter 1925.
48. All of the preceding in Kraus 1942–1943, vol. I, p. 11.
49. Zirnis 1979, pp. 64–65, 90. Jabir explicitly notes that the version of the *Emerald Tablet* quoted by him is taken from "Balīnās the Sage" (i.e., pseudo-Apollonius of Tyana), although it differs slightly from the (probably even earlier) version preserved in pseudo-Apollonius of Tyana's *Sirr al-khalīqa* (*The Secret of Creation*): see Weisser 1980, p. 46.
50. Zirnis 1979. On some Shī'ite aspects of *The Book of the Element of the Foundation*, see Lory 2016a.
51. Kraus 1942–1943, vol. I, pp. 43–44.
52. Forster 2018.
53. Edited by Berthelot 1906, pp. 310–363; the Latin translation of one of the seventy treatises (*The Book of the Thirty Words*, *Kitāb al-Thalāthīn kalima*, Kr. no. 125, translated as *Liber XXX verborum*) was separately edited by Colinet 2000, pp. 179–187. In the ms. used by Berthelot, the name of the translator appears as a certain *Renaldus Cremonensis* (Berthelot 1906, p. 310, cf. Forster 2018). However, a medieval list of the works translated by Gerard of Cremona (Latin: *Gerardus Cremonensis*) mentions the *Liber de Septuaginta* as one of the three alchemical works translated by the *magister* (see Burnett 2001, p. 280, cf. Moureau 2020, pp. 106, 111).
54. Kraus 1942–1943, vol. I, p. 63.
55. Ḥarbī al-Ḥimyarī occurs several times in the Jabirian writings as one of Jabir's teachers. He supposedly was 463 years old when Jabir met him (see Kraus 1942–1943, vol. I, p. xxxvii). According to Sezgin 1971, p. 127, the fact that Jabir dedicated a book to Ḥarbī's contributions to alchemy points to the existence in Jabir's time of a written work attributed to him.
56. All of the preceding in Kraus 1942–1943, vol. I, pp. 64–67. On the meaning here of *muṣaḥḥaḥāt*, see esp. p. 64 n. 1 and the accompanying text. See also Sezgin 1971, pp. 160–162, 167–168, 246–247.
57. Sezgin 1971, p. 248.
58. Kraus 1942–1943, vol. I, p. 69. On "the science of specific properties" (*ʿilm al-khawāṣṣ*, i.e., the science dealing with the hidden powers of mineral, vegetable and animal substances, and with their practical applications in medical and various other pursuits), see Kraus 1942–1943, vol. II, pp. 61–95.
59. Kraus 1942–1943, vol. I, pp. 70–74; Sezgin 1971, p. 248.

60. All of the preceding in [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I, pp. 75–76. The theory of the balance is extensively discussed by [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. II, pp. 187–303; see also [Lory 1989](#), pp. 130–150.
61. [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I, p. 76; [Lory 1989](#), pp. 103–105.
62. [Starr 2009](#), pp. 74–75.
63. [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I, pp. 100–101.
64. [Corbin 1950](#); [Lory 2000](#).
65. Edited and translated by [Newman 1994](#), pp. 288–293.
66. [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I, pp. 111–116. On *khārṣīnī*, see [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. II, pp. 22–23. Excerpts from the first six *Books on the Seven Metals* (the *Book of Gold*, the *Book of Silver*, the *Book of Copper*, the *Book of Iron*, the *Book of Tin*, and the *Book of Lead*) and the full Arabic text of the seventh book (the *Book of Khārṣīnī*) have been edited by [Watanabe 2023](#), pp. 236–334.
67. [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I, pp. 117–140.
68. A number of non-extant treatises (Kr. nos. 1750, 1778, 1795, 1981, 1987, 1992, 1994) are also discussed by [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I, pp. 142–154. Kraus refers to *ʿilm al-ṭilasmāt* as "théurgie" (theurgy) throughout; see, e.g., [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I, pp. 75, 143, *et pass.* On "the science of specific properties" (*ʿilm al-khawāṣṣ*), see [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. II, pp. 61–95.
69. [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I, pp. 142–143.
70. [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I, pp. 146–147.
71. On "the science of specific properties" (*ʿilm al-khawāṣṣ*), see [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. II, pp. 61–95.
72. [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I, pp. 148–152. The theory of the balance, which is mainly expounded in *The Books of the Balances* (Kr. nos. 303–446, see above), is extensively discussed by [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. II, pp. 187–303; see also [Lory 1989](#), pp. 130–150.
73. [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I, p. 153.
74. [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I, p. 154.
75. [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I, pp. 156–159; facsimile in [Siggel 1958](#).
76. [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I, p. 165.
77. All of the preceding in [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I, pp. 3–4.
78. [Kraus 1942–1943](#), vol. I, p. 141, note 1.

79. Kraus 1942–1943, vol. I, pp. 141–142.
80. All of the preceding in Kraus 1942–1943, vol. I, pp. 155–160.
81. All of the preceding in Kraus 1942–1943, vol. I, pp. 161–166.
82. All of the preceding in Kraus 1942–1943, vol. I, pp. 167–169.
83. All of the preceding in Kraus 1942–1943, vol. I, pp. 170–171.
84. Kraus 1942–1943, vol. II, pp. 42–45.
85. Kraus 1942–1943, vol. II, p. 35.
86. Kraus 1942–1943, vol. II, pp. 31–32.
87. Kraus 1942–1943, vol. II, pp. 32–33.
88. Kraus 1942–1943, vol. II, p. 40.
89. Kraus 1942–1943, vol. II, p. 41.
90. Kraus 1942–1943, vol. II, pp. 35–40.
91. Kraus 1942–1943, vol. II, p. 40. Kraus also notes that this is rather remarkable given the existence of works attributed to Stephanus of Alexandria in the Arabic tradition.
92. Kraus 1942–1943, vol. II, pp. 40–41.
93. Manuscripts of extant works are listed by Sezgin 1971 and Ullmann 1972.
94. All of the preceding in Kraus 1942–1943, vol. II, pp. 41–42; cf. Lory 2008b. On the etymology of the word *nošāder*, see Laufer 1919, pp. 504–506 (arguing that it is a Persian word derived from Sogdian); Ruska 1923a, p. 7 (arguing for a Persian origin).
95. Nomanul Haq 1994.
96. Kraus 1942–1943, vol. II, p. 1, note 1; Weisser 1980, p. 199. On the dating and historical background of the *Sirr al-khalīqa*, see Kraus 1942–1943, vol. II, pp. 270–303; Weisser 1980, pp. 39–72.
97. Kraus 1942–1943, vol. II, p. 1.
98. Norris 2006.

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Note that some other Latin works attributed to Jabir/Geber (*Summa perfectionis*, *De inventione veritatis*, *De investigatione perfectionis*, *Liber fornacum*, *Testamentum Geberi*, and *Alchemia Geberi*) are widely considered to be [pseudepigraphs](#) which, though largely drawing on Arabic sources, were originally written by Latin authors in the 13th–14th centuries (see [pseudo-Geber](#)); see [Moureau 2020](#), p. 112; cf. [Forster 2018](#).